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THE OTHER SIDE

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CIA's Assessment On Iran Erroneous

WASHINGTON

In this savagely competitive town, foreign policy officials have often made the intelligence agencies the scapegoats for their own mistakes of judgment. But in the case of Iran, the intelligence was erroneous.

The Senate Committee on Intelligence has a hot potato on its hands in the form of an inaccurate CIA assessment of the position of the shah submitted to the White House in mid-August. When Congress convenes, the committee will have to decide how far to push the inquiry into Admiral Stansfield Turner's performance as CIA director and what remedial action to recommend.

The CIA assessment was so far off the mark that President Carter is deeply concerned by this failure to comprehend a situation critical to American security.

Officials who have seen the document describe it as "180 degrees wrong" in its underestimation of the growing political and religious opposition and in its bland reassurance that the shah did not face even a serious crisis, much less the major revolt that has occurred.

The agency was not alone in its ignorance of the forces boiling beneath the surface glitter of Iranian society.

The U.S. ambassador, William H. Sullivan, does not like to be reminded of his public assurance six months ago that the spreading riots were not a cause of major concern. The State Department shared with the CIA an uninformed optimism and was as isolated as the shah himself from the realities.

However, it is the CIA's job abroad to know the depth and motivation of the opposition in countries important to U.S. security. Satellite photography is of no help in this task since political intentions are hidden from the camera's eye, and human sources are essential.

If this kind of reporting had been available, Carter officials feel that policy could have been adjusted to head off the crisis. There would have been less pressure on human rights and more insistence that the shah reach a compromise settlement with the moderate opposition elements. Even now, little is known about how the opposition is organized and financed.

This failure, taken together with the lack of early warning on the Communist coup in Afghanistan, transforming that country into a Soviet satellite, has focused the administration's concern on the agency's ability to collect and accurately analyze intelligence. There is a sympathetic understanding of the fact that congressional investigations, excessive publicity, and the instability caused by five directors in five years have badly shaken morale.

Under the white heat of so much criticism, there is a natural tendency for operators in the field to play it safe by avoiding the risky recruitment of agents who may prove controversial. The lack of any

legislation to protect the identity of CIA officers overseas is an inhibiting factor.

The risk of exposure of agent identities in legal trials like the ITT case and in the published memoirs of disaffected employees is enough to discourage the cooperation of foreign intelligence services. The willingness of foreign citizens to supply information when their lives may be at stake is much reduced.

Responding to these genuine concerns, Carter officials have put the Senate Intelligence Committee on notice that they are not prepared to accept many of the inhibiting restrictions and reporting requirements that the committee has written into its proposed new legal charter for the intelligence community.

They feel that the pendulum has swung too far from inadequate congressional oversight toward excessive congressional involvement in the day-to-day management of the agency.

The stage is set for a showdown between the administration and the Senate committee on these issues when the new Congress convenes. The election results indicate that the country is ready to support a firmer defense posture bolstered by an effective intelligence service.

After 19 months in office, Admiral Turner's performance as CIA director is also coming under closer scrutiny from within the Carter administration.

He must take responsibility for the misleading Iranian assessment, and it has raised questions about his judgment and style of management.

In addition to recently published criticism of his personal intervention in the estimating process, doubts are expressed about the quality of some of the people he has brought in from the outside and the damaging effect of drastic reorganization moves.

There is a feeling he spends too much time making public speeches around the country and not enough time at his desk.

More than anything else at this stage, American intelligence needs continuity of competent leadership. The hope is that Turner can learn from the Iranian debacle. There is no sign yet that Mr. Carter is losing confidence in Turner as his personal choice but a repetition of the Iranian failure could change his mind.